

Negotiating Islam with cinema

A theoretical discussion on Indonesian Islamic films

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims at exploring certain negotiations that justify Muslim's cinematic texts and practices. It focuses on the questions about what is Islamic and un-Islamic about film, who and what decides certain films as Islamic, and what are the meanings of cinematic practices of Islam for Muslim society. Furthermore, this paper tries to investigate these questions from a theoretical basis using concepts of Islamic modernity, Islamic Ummah and Public, in order to shed some light on the idea of how a production of an Islamic film may trigger the creation of a political and religious identity.

KEYWORDS

Indonesian Islamic film, Islamic modernity, Islamic Ummah and Public.

A. INTRODUCTION

Over the last five years, we have witnessed Islam's increasing omnipresence in the realm of Indonesian cinema. At present, in Indonesia, Islamic films with a large variety of themes abound using many ways of mediations and practices. Films picturing Islamic symbols, rituals and values, whether in a propagative (*dakwah*) manner or not, are not only screened in theatres, but also broadcast on TV, available on disks, and may be downloaded from the Internet. As a result, new cinematic practices have emerged in the country. If in the early 1960s many good Indonesian Muslims avoided going to the movies because it was associated with improper *behaviour*, now a days, even devout Muslims living in *pesantren* (Islamic boarding house) may attend films screened in theatres and produce films of their own. However, at times, certain Muslim groups become aggressively opposed to certain films to such an extent that they ask the authorities to ban them from public viewing.

As Islam does not have film technology of its own (see Weintraub 2011:

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7), the emergence of new Islamic mediations and practices in Indonesian cinema attests to the multifaceted relations between the practice of Islam and secular films. These relations can no longer be adequately framed in terms of commercial proximity or in terms of value regimes organized around a variety of negotiations that justify Muslim's cinematic practices. This paper, which is based on my on-going research at Leiden University, intends to shine some light on these negotiations. However, since my research is still in its infancy, I will be unable to provide nuanced arguments throughout the paper. Instead, in a more theoretical perspective, I will explore questions such as what is Islamic and what is not about film, who and what decides whether a film is Islamic, and what these Islamic cinematic texts and practices mean for Muslim society. To answer these questions, I will focus on the concepts of Islamic modernity, Islamic Ummah, and Islamic public. Before arriving at these concepts, I will first present a definition of Islamic film, and provide an introductory landscape of Indonesian Muslims' cinematic texts and practices. I think it is also important to say at the outset that, regardless of the fact that the production of Islamic films, along with other related practices, cannot be seen in isolation from their commercial frameworks, this paper will be limited to the discussion of the cultural practices of Islamic films in their relations to issues of political and religious identity.

B. ON DEFINING ISLAMIC FILM

A film is only truly Islamic if Islam is the guideline in all the film mediation practices (Ahmad Sarwat, cited in Van Heeren 2008: 85).

Definitions of Islamic film vary. One person may regard a film as Islamic as long as it contains Islamic symbols and cites Qur'anic verses or the sayings of the Prophet. Someone else may define an Islamic film as a film that contains strong values, morals and deeds that are compatible with Islamic teachings, without necessarily citing Islamic texts. Someone else, still, may apply more strict prerequisites for a film to be labelled Islamic, as is showed in the above quote from Ahmad Sarwat, an *ustadz* from shariaonline.com. Furthermore, if we ask the audiences of Indonesian cinema what they regard as Islamic films, we may never get a single and clear definition of Islamic films. The same will also be true for filmmakers.

This does not mean that there is no such clear thing as Islamic films. Indeed, Muslim society has a set of ideas in mind about what is Islamic and not Islamic in films. However, these ideas are primarily discursive and subject to many religious, social, economic and political discourses. My preliminary examination of written Indonesian Muslim's cinematic texts and practices reveals that Muslims increasingly care about the idea of Islamic film. If in the past Islamic films mainly referred to propaganda films, or *film dakwah*, today's discourses use many different names; *film dakwah*, *film religi*, *film Islam* and even *film Islami*. Furthermore, *dakwah films* from the early fifties considerably

differ from present-day *dakwah* films. Therefore, it is not surprising that what in the forties was called an Islamic film would not be regarded as Islamic in the contemporary Islamic discourses.

My observations at the shooting location of a film about *pesantren*, which took place during the fasting month of *Ramadhan*, provide interesting evidence about the fleeting set of ideas pertaining to Islamic film. The film is about a group of *pesantren* students who, having gone through the *pesantren*'s Islamic educational system, successfully transform their educational experiences into a powerful philosophy for their adult lives. The film is based on an autobiographical novel written by one of the novel's characters. When I told the film's director of my intention to observe the making of his film for my research on Islamic film, he laughed out loud and told me that his film was not at all Islamic. The novel's author also rejected the idea that his novel is Islamic, pointing to the scarcity of references to Qur'anic verses in it. However, witnessing the shooting on location made me see things differently. When I was talking to the author while the film crew was preparing the takes of the scenes, one of the film crew passed in front of us carrying some notebooks in his hand. All of a sudden, the novel's author stopped the man to see the books he had in his hand. Most of them were plain brown, but some of them had colourful pictures of actresses from the 1980s. Pointing to them, he reminded the crew not to use them, since they were not allowed in the *pesantren*. I expected the man would say yes to his reminder, but he simply reacted by telling him that the books were for students who were sitting far removed from the camera, at which the author consented. This shows a notion of what is allowed and what not in the production of a film which, from the very beginning, he rejected to call *film Islami*, but, in actual practice, was juxtaposed, consciously or not, to Islamic symbols and values. In the end, the author told me that he did not mind to call his film *film Islam* (but rejected the term *film Islami*). Unfortunately, I do not have relevant data of the perspectives of the film's audiences, but I believe that they likely have their own arguments about what is Islamic about the film and what is not, without necessarily concurring with that of the filmmaker, or even of the Islamic authorities or *ulama*.

But, what then is an Islamic film? Defining an Islamic film is somewhat problematic. Not only will the definition be full of assumptions about what constitute both art and religion (George 2010: 56), but it also risks of either excluding a kind of film actually containing stronger spirit of Islam or including a film whose majority of its audience would never call it Islamic. Therefore, research on this subject tends to stay away from making a rigid definition of Islamic film (see Tito Imanda 2012: 89-104) or propose another term as an alternative. Ekky, for instance, proposes the term "Prophetic film", referring to films that bring its viewers to righteousness, make them avoid evil, and develop their faith in God in Islamic way (Imanda 2012: 91). While Dwyer (2006: 97), proposes the term "Islamicate film", which refers to films that are concerned with Islam as everyday social and cultural lives, without being necessarily produced by a Muslim filmmaker. However, in order to

answer the research questions above, these definitions that I have explored so far need an elaborate examination.

Of course, an Islamic film must contain Islamic values or messages, delivered through the pictures of the film. But defining an Islamic film should go beyond this confine. At this point, I agree with Hoesterey and Clark (2012), who refer to the emic data in order to identify whether a film is called Islamic or not.¹ However, still, to identify why such a film is acceptable in Islam, the ethnographic case above must be carefully taken into account. I argue that there is obviously a set of ideas about what constitutes Islamic films that circulates in the minds of Muslim public, which manifests in their negotiations with what is or is not allowed in films about Islam. Therefore, in defining an Islamic film for my research, I will keep in mind not only the visual representation of Islam and Muslim society in the films, but also the negotiations based on which Muslim public justifies its acceptance of a film as Islamic. To do so, I will pay more attention to the negotiations in the social, political and economic contexts of these films, as well as contestations about when, where and why the term Islamic films came to be and continually discussed in Indonesia. In the end, I argue that the definition of Islamic films should reflect the sets of social practices that explain the processes of negotiation Indonesian Muslims use in including a secular aspect of modernity into part of their religious imagination and expression. I will explain the inclusion of secular aspects into religiousness further in the later sections.

C. LANDSCAPES OF INDONESIAN ISLAMIC FILMS

Historical discourse

... [A]nd the most important thing: what will the people say later? I am well-known as a devout and faithful Muslim, and suddenly will be captured sitting in the cinema next to women who are non-*muhrim*.² And what kind of woman Kartini is! She is way too modern, and ... her behaviour is in question. No! I do not want it as is not allowed. ... [Y]es, it is a place of disgrace, that is the only meaning of cinema, of film, a place for non-believers to give examples of kissing, sexual embracing, and adultery (Achdiat K. Mihardja 2009).

The Dutch first introduced film to Indonesia in the early 1900s, but the then known Dutch East Indies needed a quarter century more to produce its first film *Loetoeng Kasaroeng* (1926), and a half-century to produce a national film, Usmar Ismail's *Darah dan doa* (Blood and prayer, 1950).³ During these times, the acceptability of cinematic practices in Islamic law was a hot issue among

¹ They said that *film Islami* is "said to 'breath Islam' (*bernafaskan Islam*)" (Hoesterey and Clark 2012: 208).

² Non-muhrim women refer to those that you are allowed to marry in Islam.

³ Usmar Ismail's *Darah dan doa* (1950) came to be regarded as the first national film due to the fact that it was the first Indonesian film whose filmmakers were all indigenous. From this film onward, Indonesian films started to be defined in some kind of national political mediation, enabling the ruling government to play major roles in film production (see Sen and Hill 2000).

the majority Muslims of Indonesian society.⁴ The citation above, which was taken from a novel published in 1949, reflects a Muslim's impression of going to a cinema, which was regarded as a source of disgrace.

At the same time, however, Muslim filmmakers were by no means absent from film production. Among the first to "Islamize" Indonesian national films was *Lembaga seniman budayawan Muslimin Indonesia* (*Lesbumi*, an association for Indonesian Muslim artists and cultural activists), whose members included prominent filmmakers of the time such as Usmar Ismail, Djamaluddin Malik, and Asrul Sani. In 1959, Asrul Sani released the first Indonesian Islamic-themed film ever entitled *Titian serambut dibelah tujuh* (A bridge of seven-split hair). Five years later, two films about the religious intention of the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca were produced by Djamaluddin Malik in his *Panggilan Nabi Ibrahim* (The prophet Abraham's call, 1964), and by Asrul Sani in his *Tauhid* (the Unity of God, 1964). The fact that these first Islamic-themed films were about Islamic reformation and Islamic propaganda, suggests the presence of a kind of central discourse on Islamic film in the country. Furthermore, the fact that *Lesbumi* was a cultural organization under the umbrella of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), a social Islamic organization whose members were regarded as traditional Muslims, raises a number of questions. These questions include, first how they were able to arrive at film production, something really modern for that time; second, how they have been maintaining their cinematic practices up to present day; third and more importantly, how non-NU Muslims have contributed to Islamic cinematic practices in Indonesia.

Political circumstances

The establishment of *Lesbumi* had many to do with the political situation in the new independence country. At the heart of their cinematic practices were the ideological tensions between *Lesbumi* and *Lekra* (*Lembaga kebudayaan rakyat*, Institute of people's culture), which culminated in the political turbulence of the 1966 tragedy. As *Lesbumi* survived the turbulence, *Lesbumi* filmmakers continued to dominate. However, due to the new government's strong suspicion of political Islam, *Lesbumi* was downplayed and slowly but surely put to its end. Then, in 1975, Suharto established the MUI (Majelis Ulama Indonesia, the Indonesian Ulama council) to take full control over the country's Islamic expressions.⁵ No later than the beginning of the 1980's did the MUI become board member of the LSF (Lembaga sensor film, Film censorship council), taking over the lead and starting to drive the discourse of Indonesian Islamic films by using religious opinions such as *tausiyya*⁶ and

⁴ Something that is actually not particular to Indonesia, but is to a varying degree also debated in other parts of the Muslim world (Shafik 1998; Larkin 2008).

⁵ For discussions about the functions of MUI as the government's supporter, see Porter 2002 and Van Dijk 2007.

⁶ It means that religious advice is usually given by, but not restricted to, Muslim scholars.

*fatwa*⁷ (Majelis Ulama Indonesia 1976: 63-71). Much later, the *Muhammadiyah*⁸ also unsurprisingly entered filmmaking by establishing a fully furnished film production house in 1996. A decade later, Hanung Bramantyo, a film director *Muhammadiyah* background, produced *Ayat-ayat cinta* (Verses of love, 2008), in which he employed Din Syamsuddin, a high rank Muslim scholar in the *Muhammadiyah*, as the film's religious advisor. As the film became the most successful Islamic film ever, it marks a new era of Indonesian cinema of an Islamic kind.

The rise of the middle class and literary society

Ayat-ayat cinta's successful production was not only due to the more open situation under the post-Suharto regime, but also because of the increasing number of middle class Muslims who are willing to celebrate their piety in an Islamic guise of modern lifestyle (Heryanto 2011). Another major cause was the increasing number of Islamic literary communities. FLP (Forum Lingkar Pena) is such a community that, with its number of members exceeding thousands of young Muslim writers, stimulates the production of Islamic films. As a matter of evidence, *Ayat-ayat cinta* is an adaptation of a novel of same title written by one of FLP's members, Habiburrahman el-Shirazy. Another important literary community is Komunitas Matapena (Matapena Community). Like FLP, it concerns itself with Muslim's literary activities, but its focus is on Muslims living in *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools). Parallel to Islamic literary communities, Islamic films have been increasingly discussed concentrated mostly in educational institutions. The Morality Audio Visual Network (MAV-NET) is such a discussion group. This is a kind of a film discussion association, consisting of representatives from seven film communities and institutions; the Fun Community, M-Screen, KAMMI,⁹ Rohis Mimazah,¹⁰ IKJ (Institut Kesenian Jakarta, Jakarta art institute), MQTV (Manajemen Qalbu Television) Bandung, and Pesantren Darunnajah (Van Heeren 2008: 84-85). This indicates that Muslim cinematic practices have increasingly paved its way into the visual forefronts of Islamic expression.

The pesantren film

Sooner than anybody expected, however, at the beginning of 2011, a *pesantren* in Tasikmalaya, West Java, produced an amateurish film of more than

⁷ A *fatwa* is an opinion on a point of law, in Islam, on all civil or religious matters (*Encyclopaedia of Islam* 1965: 886). Like *tausiyya*, a *fatwa* can be issued by anybody, but the latter's authority tends to be regarded as stronger than the former's. Still, neither of them is binding in nature.

⁸ The Muhammadiyah is one of the biggest Islamic organizations in Indonesia and was founded by Ahmad Dahlan in 1912.

⁹ KAMMI (Kesatuan Aksi Mahasiswa Muslim Indonesia) is an association of Muslim university students.

¹⁰ Rohis Mimazah (Rohani Islam Masjid Mimazah) is a sort of Islamic extra-curricular activity in senior high schools.

90-minute. The *pesantren*, famously called Pesantren Condong, was founded in the nineteenth century, and used to be a traditional *pesantren*. But for reasons of survival, at the turn of the twenty-first century, it adopted a combination of modern and traditional systems, enabling the *santri*, or *pesantren* students to experience secular activities inherent in modern culture in a wider sense. These activities include the establishment of two literary clubs as a curricular activity for *santri*. These are the Matapena Community and the Ruwaada Production House. The former, which was part of the Matapena Community network in Jogjakarta, concentrates on training *santri* in writing skills, while the latter concentrates on drama and broadcasting. Through these literary clubs, the *santri* succeeded in making a film entitled *Hidup sekali hiduplah yang berarti* (Life is only once, live it meaningfully). The film itself is an omnibus of eleven stories, all directed by Lena Sa'yati, a senior female *santri* of the *pesantren*. It contains chronicles of *santri's* everyday lives, such as the relationship between female and male *santris*, the implementation of the *pesantren's* language programmes, and the encouragement of the *pesantren's* developmental programmes. All the stories are based on a book of the same title, written by a *santri* of the same *pesantren*. On top of this, the dialogues of the film are either in Arabic or in English, arguing that the *pesantren's* film culture is part of the institution's educational program. As there is no historical precedence for this production, investigating it would be very interesting. As a place for training religious authorities (*ulama*), the *pesantren* is a religious space, and any presence of secular practices in the *pesantren*, such as film making or movie viewing, or even the mere presence of cinematic technology would only be allowed after the *pesantren* community has reached a political consensus. Analyses on the *pesantren's* cinematic practices, thus, will shed light on the actors and discourses that generate shifting relations between religious and secular practices.

Themes of Indonesian Islamic films

The first Indonesian Islamic films were produced soon after independence. They mostly dealt with issues of Islamic reformation, patriotism, and nationalism based on Islam, and sometimes of the women's emancipation movement. Films such as *Darah dan doa* (1950), *Titian serambut dibelah tujuh* (1959), and *Matjan Kemayoran* (1964) are clear examples of this. The second rise of Indonesian Islamic films shows a different trend in themes. 1980s Islamic films, with few exceptions, were mostly concerned with biographies of Muslim saints such as *Sunan Kali Jaga* (1983), *Sembilan Wali/Wali Sanga* (Nine saints, 1985), *Sunan Gunung Djati* (1985), *Sunan Kalidjaga dan Syech Siti Jenar* (1985), and *Fatahillah* (1997).¹¹ But in the late eighties, another trend in Islamic films emerged with the production of films starring Rhoma Irama, a *dangdut* singer. Strengthened, as they were, by the presence of Rhoma Irama, a pious Muslim artist in the public space, some Indonesian film audiences

¹¹ This trend might have coincided with the ruling government's national hero's program political agenda (Barnard 1997) or that of "controlling" Islam (Liddle 1996).

regard his films, spiced with *dangdut* songs such as *Nada dan dakwah* (1991), as Islamic *dakwah* films.

The production of Islamic films started to rise again under the post-New Order regimes. It started with Dedy Mizwar who produced *Kiamat sudah dekat* (The doomsday is close, 2003), of which, a year later a soap opera version was made and broadcast during the month of Ramadan on one of the private national television channels. In 2004, Garin Nugroho directed another Islamic film entitled *Rindu kami padamu* (the international title: Of Love and Eggs). After a three-year shortage of Islamic film production, Hanung Bramantyo released *Ayat-ayat cinta* at the end of February 2008. This cinematic adaptation of the national best-selling novel of the same title by Habiburrahman el Shirazy was incredibly successful. Not only did it gain euphoric responses from its audiences, also it received several awards from film festivals. The film is considered to have enticed other film producers to start producing Islamic films. Their themes include a variety of issues such as an Islamic love story (*Ketika cinta bertasbih*, When love glorifies, 2008), Islamic education (3 *Doa 3 cinta*, 3 prayers 3 loves, 2008; *Laskar pelangi*, The rainbow troops, 2008), terrorism (3 *Doa 3 cinta*;¹² *Khalifah* 2010), pilgrimage to Mecca (*Emak ingin naik haji*, Mom wants to go on pilgrimage, 2010), biography of *ulama* (*Sang Pencerah*, The enlightener, 2010), gender (*Perempuan berkalung sorban*, A woman with a turban necklace, 2009), Islamic moral life (*Kun Fayakun* 2008; *Doa yang mengancam*, A threatening prayer, 2009; *Dalam mihrab cinta*, In the niche of love, 2010), and social issues (*Alangkah lucunya negeri ini*, What a super funny country this is, 2009).

Audiences of Islamic films

No less significant is the fact that the public screening of Islamic films has created a new kind of audiences. While the national cinema belongs to the urban youth (mostly they are also Muslims), the public screening of Islamic films has invited a number of spectators not used to attending film screenings in the cinema. An *akhwat*, or a woman Islamist Muslim activist, said that she would love to watch a film in the cinema despite her refusal of mixing with the opposite gender in public.¹³ In addition, my experience with watching *Sang Pencerah* was that a big crowd of children wearing their religious school uniform came to the cinema with their religious teachers. When I asked one of the teachers where they came from and how she came with her students, she told me that they came from a *Muhammadiyah* TPA (Taman Pendidikan Al-Qur'an, a basic program for Qur'anic education). It was part of the school's program to bring their students to the cinema in order for them to become familiar with Ahmad Dahlan, the founding father of their religious institution. This kind of practice is not new. During the Suharto era, when certain Islamic films such as *Fatahillah* (1994) were screened in the cinema,

¹² Beside focusing on issue of *pesantren* education, this film also concerns on terrorism.

¹³ <http://www.dearestmask.blog.friendster.com//2007/12/kisah-di-balik-produksi-ayat-ayat-cinta-bag3>. Last accessed on 25 January 2010, but the site does not exist anymore.

the ruling government used to oblige students to watch it and to hand in a resume of the film they made to their teachers. While the practice is similar, it is now the school teachers who make the initiative; in the past, it was the government.

D. ISLAMIC FILM AND MODERNITY

If you ask an urban Muslim who attended the film screening of *Ayat-ayat cinta* in a luxurious 21 Cinema at Plaza Indonesia, whether his visit was part of his expression of modernity, he will most likely give you a negative answer. Nevertheless, the mall, the cinema, the film projector, and all technologies supporting the film screening, all will only lead you to agree that he obviously visits part of modern culture. So, if this man did not care about the issue of modernity in an Islamic film he was watching, how then might we better see the relationship between Islamic films and modernity? To explain this, let me speak about Islamic modernity in general in order to give a better sense of how Islamic films and modernity might be understood.

Modernity might be argued to stem from a secular Western origin. However, Western modernity is not the only "authentic" model since reinterpretation of different dimensions of modernity is emerging in all societies (Eisenstadt 2000: 1-29). In places outside Europe, modernity may have encountered local contexts along with the impacts of globalization and post-colonial legacies and the result is that modernity has become removed from its European model. Studying modernity in non-Western societies, Gaonkar (1999: 1-18) emphasizes that there is not only one modernity, but there are many and they are everywhere; it is simultaneously defined and redefined within a specific cultural and civilizational context, and different starting points for the transition to modernity lead to different outcomes.

Studies on multiple modernities have emphasized on regarding modernity as a cultural attitude, rather than as that of politics. Central to this cultural approach is to regard products of non-Western modernity not as imitative, but as creative adaptations. It is "not simply a matter of adjusting the form or recoding the practice to soften the impact of modernity. Rather, it points to the manifold ways in which people 'make' themselves modern, as opposed to being 'made' modern by alien and impersonal forces, and where they give themselves an identity and a destiny" (Gaonkar 1999: 16). As an active adaptation, modernity becomes part of what people daily speak, write and perform, and is inextricably linked to varied dimensions of social lives. Hence, in order to understand the meaning of modernity, we need to pay attention to how modernity is expressed in daily discourses of society (Çinar 2005: 4). By looking into modernity in this way, one will be able to recognize what are at stakes that make people modern, and accordingly, able to make sense how modernity in a certain region might develop differently from modernity in another place.

Multiple modernities approaches also recognize conflicting cultural processes (Kahn 2001: 661), which take place during the process of

modernization. It means that constructing modernity in a form of multiple-logics notions will be capable of understanding the transformative meanings of modern people's cultural lives, which are not-coincidentally very divergent. Çinar's research may serve as a model for this of approach. Turkish modernity, she argues, is a product of various contending ideas, among which Islam becomes one of the major contending aspects in public. Along with social, political and economic world systems, Islam, in Çinar's words, intervenes with the daily lives of Turkish people. And once religion is there, it starts to define and redefine, structure and restructure, tolerate and negotiate existing sets of practices, patterns and forms of everyday lives in order to transform them toward those of an alternative future (Çinar 2005: 1-32).

Çinar's argument is considerably resonances with Talal Asad's theory about the inseparable juxtaposition of the secular and the religious, emerging within the process of modernization. Asad (2003: 1-17) agrees with the idea that secularization requires a separation of religious and government secular institutions. However, in social practices the intentions and motives of both the secular and the religious are not neatly separated and are subjects of specific circumstances. For him, these intentions and motives are the key in defining the relationship between the two. In relation to an anthropological understanding of modern Muslim society, Asad suggests that we should look into the relationship between the religious and the secular, not so much as to ask about their origins, but to situate "the comparison of embedded concepts (representations) between societies" of different times and spaces (Asad 2003: 17). And as the flows of globalization have also entered Muslim societies, the intentions and motives of both the secular and the religious are constantly re-defined and re-negotiated so that the boundaries between them are thereby subject to changes. Any understanding of the relationship between the religious and the secular should be therefore situated in a way that is able to follow their changing meanings and fleeting boundaries (Tayob 2004: 9). This analysis, however, should not regard the relations between the religious and the secular in a neat dichotomy; it will be rather more promising if they are formulated in such a way that the religious has been transformed to the extent that secular aspects are incorporated to become part of religious expression, or probably religious imagination. Indeed, the boundaries between the religious and the secular are blurred and always changing.

In relation to Islamic film practices, I have two points to make here. First, we might better find their relationship in films themselves. Modernity has been associated with enlightenment, renewal, reformation, ideas of the future and the like. If we look into Indonesian Islamic films, some of them do talk about these ideas. The film *Titian serambut dibelah tudjuh* is a good example for this. The film, which tells about the journey of a young Muslim teacher to a religiously misguided village, calls for a reformation of religious lives. In addition, some Islamic films even have already suggested the idea of modernity from their titles alone, such as *Sang Pencerah* (Hanung Bramantyo 2010), which means in English "the enlightener", referring to Ahmad Dahlan,

one of the first Indonesian Muslim scholars who spread the idea of Islamic reformation in the country through the institution he established in 1912, the Muhammadiyah. Second, we might see their relationship in Muslims' first encounter with film technology. Let us look into *santri* Muslims. Living in *pesantren*, they usually restrict themselves from secular public spaces, in a sense that their encounters with secular subjects or products, including the use of film technology, should be in agreement with the *pesantren* regulations. This condition has formed in such a way a sort of stereotype from the others if they are secluded, backward and rural. At the same time however, the limited use of the secular technology in *pesantren* has formed the *santri*'s view whether what is coming from urban culture, including the sheer consumption of cinema, has much to do with an expression of modernity. And since they need to counter these stereotypes, their passion for film production and consumption is consciously addressed to prove that they are not rural, but modern. No doubt, my initial interview with some of them reveals that their discourse about cinematic practices revolves around, among others, the idea of clearing *pesantren* of these stereotypes and making themselves Muslims that are more modern. At this point, without necessarily being aware of their arguments, these *pesantren* students are using Islam as the contending idea of what they interpret as being "modern Muslim".

E. ISLAMIC FILM AND THE IDEA OF THE UMMAH

Central to the discourse of Indonesian cinema is the theme of nationhood, in which national identity, among other issues, is at the heart of its narratives.¹⁴ However, the discussion will become more challenging when the term of nationhood is used in a loose way, and religion, as one of the structures of people's identity, is used as another point of departure to look at the national identities imagined by the Indonesian cinema (particularly Islamic film). This is because such alternative viewpoint extends the possibilities of understanding the theme of nationhood.

Within the doctrines of Islam, all Muslims are brothers irrespective of their ethnic, economic, social and other backgrounds and their connection is widely known among Muslims as *al-ukhuwwah al-Islāmiyyah* (Islamic brotherhood). This doctrine, to some extent, has created a sort of bonding, which unites Muslims throughout the world within a single imagination of an Islamic community, which Muslim people call the Ummah. This is why, for Gellner, Islam may serve as "a functional equivalent of nationalism" (Breuilly 2006: xxv), as long as the doctrinal and strict Unitarianism of the religion functions as a cohesive factor for uniting identity (Gellner 2006: 78). At the same time, however, modern world systems have identified Muslims more heavily through their national identity than through their religion. In other words, the borders of nation-state imagination often challenge the Islamic idea

¹⁴ Film *Putri Giok* (The Jade Princess, 1981) is a good example for this in the sense that it describes how the narrative of the film is formulated in the frame of the state's project of national identity formation (see Heider 1991).

of the Ummah, questioning the extent to which an imagination of identity imposed by the religion of Islam, somehow, fits into a state's programme of national identity formation. To put the question in another way, how do Muslims negotiate their imagination of an Islamic community with that of their national identity?

Anderson has argued that print culture could generate an idea of national consciousness (1991: 46). This argument challenges the ability of film as a medium, which functions more rigorously than printing technology in terms of penetrating the public space and the imagining of the audiences, to be infrastructural for religious imagination of a shared identity among Muslims.¹⁵ During the course of my research, I examine Muslim cinematic texts and practices as culture. By this, I mean that they are constructed as efforts made by the Muslim people to generate diverse conceptions about themselves in order to create their identity (Appadurai 1996: 13; Kellner 1995: 2). The use of culture as a conceptual approach is also to remind me that the construction of national identity in the present days was no longer "the harbinger of a worldwide evolution, but the peculiar product of a particular historical epoch" (Hefner 1997: 21). Hence, given Islam's strong involvement in the historical epoch of Indonesia, Islam becomes part of contextual meanings of Indonesian national identity building.

As far as I am concerned, Islamic films, as a means of cultural expression, might be used, consciously or not, as an arena of the formation of Muslims' religious imagination. For instance, Hanung Bramantyo, director of *Ayat-ayat cinta*, tends to identify himself as a Muslim through the images of Islam that he pictures in his film (Huda 2010: 24-31). However, while the film's narratives and visualizations seem to orient its audiences to certain authoritative, middle eastern kind of Islam,¹⁶ the imagination of Islam in the film could not have a more Indonesian outlook. My hypothetical argument is that, through the medium of film, certain Muslims might imagine what they perceive as an ideal community of Muslims without necessarily relinquishing their national identity. Sometimes this argument surfaced from some of my initial interviews with some Indonesian filmmakers. In one way or another, some filmmakers tend to conflate the idea of a single Islamic community with the idea of national identity, arguing that Islam as a religion of a billion Muslims throughout the world is at the same time a signifying character of Indonesian culture. Religious imagination, thus, becomes an important theoretical concept in order to understand Indonesian Muslim's practices of cinematic culture.

When an Islamic film penetrates into the public space, however, it suddenly belongs to the public domain. The filmmakers, then, no longer solely dominate the imaginations of the Muslim identities their films impose

¹⁵ As I discussed above, what I mean by religious imagination is an identification of Muslims as being part of a larger but single Islamic community, or Ummah.

¹⁶ Nurman Hakim, one Indonesian Muslim filmmaker, is proud to confess his avid consumption of Iranian cinema, and his admiration for Semih Kaplanoğlu, a Turkish filmmaker who won the Golden Bear.

about Islam. In fact, they are deliberately debated and re-debated, constructed and reconstructed, in various forms of argumentations and justifications, by ordinary Muslim publics. To conceptualize this argument, I will turn the discussion to the notion of public sphere first pioneered by Habermas.

F. ISLAMIC (COUNTER) PUBLIC

Habermas characterizes the public of eighteenth-century Western Europe as a common space for public opinions to reach a common mind. This space was composed of printing publications and a coffeehouse society, considerably accessible to anyone, and based on the power of rationality (Habermas 1989: 32-43). As this space was less a form of bodily experiences than that of non-face-to-face gatherings, imagination becomes the core aspect that knits "a plurality of spaces into one larger space of non-assembly" (Taylor 2002: 113). A medium like film, which uses imagination as one of its visualizing powers is thus instrumental for the creation of a public.

The Habermasian public sphere as a concept was later developed by Warner's *Publics and Counterpublics* (2002), which puts more emphasis on the role of texts and their circulations. For Warner, a particular public can be understood from the circulation of its own discourse. He said that "a particular public is 'auto telic' in the sense that it only exists 'by virtue of being addressed'" (Warner 2002: 50; emphasis in original). However, these particular publics are created not simply through writing, speech, film or any single medium, but as a result of the reflexive circulation of discourse. Not the texts themselves are able to create publics, but their concatenations through time and space. This is, to paraphrase Warner's argument, because a text is understandable by its public only after the text is capable of both supposing the existence of a previously existing discourse, and postulating its responding discourse (2002: 62). So a text can address a public only when it has relations with its previous and forthcoming discourses.

Emphasizing rationality, the Habermasian public sphere, nevertheless, is criticized for its high tendency to secularity (Eickelman and Salvatore 2002: 96; Taylor 2002: 114). Meanwhile, Warner's conception is by no means different. This condition, in turn, invites a number of researches to investigate the disciplinary functions of religion in the public sphere not so much as an ideological power but as that of a dialogic one. The increasing proliferation of new media in the Muslim world, coupled with the large raise in number of educated-Muslims, has proved the emergence of a new Muslim public (Eickelman and Anderson 1999: 1-18), which at some point may act as a counter-public. This counter-public is not a mere arena where subordinate groups articulate their oppositional counter-discourses to the dominant group in society (Nancy Fraser in Warner 2002: 85), but as an arena where ordinary Muslims are able to articulate their deliberative practices within the discourses of national political life, but beyond the reach of the national space (Hirschkind 2001: 5). His "counter publics" lies in a conceptual edifice in which deliberation and discipline, or language and power, are regarded

thoroughly interdependent. The result of this counter-public is that Muslims' dialogic argumentations are capitalized to secure ethical speech and pious dispositions, which in the end, facilitate the development and practice of Islamic virtues (Hirschkind 2006: 106-107). Indonesian Islamic film is counter public in its very form of production because the production of Islamic film is born against the bulk of the national films that are spiced with scenes of horror and sex. In addition, the cinematic practices at the specific *pesantren* level I have described in section C were exercised beyond the reach of the national space.

Nevertheless, in an era when time and space are increasingly shrinking (Harvey 2004) due in part to a plurality of converged media, the social consumption of Islamic films may become so complex that it makes Muslims' public-space more fluid, fuller of tensions and less strictly bordered. Then, the deliberation of public reasoning, in the end, turns to be more complicated and multi-layered. Over the coming three years, this research, by using the concept of counter-public discussed above, wants to examine both the way a public screening of Indonesian Islamic films may hone infrastructural circumstances enabling the creation of a distinctive space of Muslims' deliberation, and the kinds of public reasoning that Indonesian Muslims use in relation to their justification of the discourse of Islamic films in the country.

G. CONCLUSION

My discussion above reveals that Indonesian Islamic films are the result of Muslims' negotiations with religious, social, political, economic, moral and cultural issues embedded in the processes of the production, circulation and consumption of these films. Within these processes, Islamic films are not value free. Borrowing Myers' argument (when explaining the cultural painting of Western dessert Aboriginal arts), they are "not contained easily within a single regime of value", rather "they become more fitted to other regimes of value organized around the concepts of art and commodity, on the one hand, and identity and the politics of indignity, on the other" (2002: 6). Nevertheless, relations between films and these regimes of values should be seen as contingent rather than permanent. "In some places it was an overtly visible commodity, but in other societies, it could be religion, politics and other values that are more important" (Larkin 2008: 81). Understanding the cinematic practices of Islam, therefore, should look into a variety of values with a clear, comprehensive, and distanced point of view.

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